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ABSTRACT

Ultra-conservatives calling themselves the "new right" have made recent gains because of grass-roots interest in issues such as blocking gun control legislation, stopping the Equal Rights Amendment, lowering taxes, and promoting religious fundamentalism. These gains raise serious questions about the future of American education. If a new-right coalition continues to grow, it is likely American education can expect another round of pressure from the ultra-conservatives to restrict funding and curricula. The consequences of eroding public support for education are significant, and unless educators are prepared to become involved in speaking firmly about the importance of education during times of change, diversity, and conflict, it is likely that many of the educational advances of the last few decades will be in jeopardy. (Author/JM)

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EDUCATION AND THE NEW RIGHT

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ABSTRACT

Recent gains by ultra-conservatives, drawing strength from grass-roots issues such as gun control, equal rights for women, taxes, and religious fundamentalism, raises serious question about the future of American education. The consequences of eroding public support for education are significant and unless educators are prepared to become involved in speaking firmly about the importance of education during times of change, diversity, and conflict, it is likely that many of the educational advances of the last few decades will be in jeopardy.

EDUCATION AND THE NEW RIGHT

The potential for eroding public support for education in a society experiencing increased taxes, inflation, teacher surplus, and dwindling enrollments raises serious questions about the future. Uncertain success of educational programs, lower test scores, failing bond issues, and general discontent about the progress of education, suggests we have entered a new phase of educational debate; a debate filled with uncertainty and confusion, exacerbated by apathy at the polls, dissolving political alliances, and marked by renewed strength of conservative backlash opposed to governmenatal spending and social legislation. The consequences for education are significant, and unless educators are prepared to become involved in speaking firmly about the importance of education during times of change, diversity, and conflict, it is likely that many of the educational advances of the last few decades will be in jeopardy.

Education is a function of public opinion; as such, it is a necessary task for educators to consider carefully the political climate that appears to be emerging on the American scene; a climate of growing discontent fed by concerned grass-root opposition to such issues as women's rights, gun control, busing, big government, the Panama Canal, and godlessness in the public schools. Many of our citizens seem to be seeking a retreat from a changing world, opposition to social legislation, and an imposition of certainty in a society,as Toffler has observed, is in the midst of a veritable

"value vertigo."[1]

Played in the shadow of a mushroom cloud, pollution, alarm about energy resources, and social discontent, grass-root support for a return to a simpler world, a halt to change, is perhaps to be expected. So too might it be expected that political interests will emerge seeking to impose a restrictive ultra-conservative philosophy midst the discontent of a changing society.

A new and perhaps significant development appears to be taking shape on the political horizon to restrict social legislation and impose a philosophy of ultra-conservatism designed to turn America back to the basics. The New Right, a coalition of ultra-conservative and far-right organizations is best described as being somewhere to the right of traditional republicanism and a bit to the left of the radical right. Using campaign tactics and literature that is both professional and influential the new right plans to elect ultra-conservatives to Congress in 1978 with hopes to control Congress by 1980.[2]

The more significant New Right ogranizations include the following:[3]

Committee for Survival of a Free Congress (CSFC). The Committee, funded initially by ultra-conservative Joseph Coors, is now directed by Paul Weyrich, past president of the conservative Heritage Foundation. The Committee plans to raise over three million dollars to elect ultra-conservatives to Congress in 1978. In 1976 the organization spent over two million to elect ultra-conservatives.

The National Conservative Political Action Committee, (NCPAC).

has been associated with the growing influence of Richard Viguerie, a political fund raiser. The National Conservative Political Action Committee plans to spend over four million dollars for the election of ultra-conservatives in 1978.

The Gun Owners of America, headed by John Birch leader H. H. Richardson plans to support candidates opposing gun legislation, however, as may be expected, in practice the group supports only ultra conservatives.

The Council for National Defense, a new entry from the ultra-conservative right, plans to defeat senators and congressmen who "believe we should take our national defense dollars and spend them on social-welfare programs."

The Conservative Caucus, (TCC) director Howard Phillips, claims, "We're going after people on the basis of their hot buttons." TCC is credited with offering assistance to Anita Bryant to take her Save Our Children campaign national.[4] The intent, clearly, is to use such issues for political organization.

In the background, a number of professional organizers are pressing to create a new political coalition of ultra-conservatives designed to restrict legislation and elect likeminded persons to public office. A major engineer of the New Right is Richard Viguerie. Viguerie claims "There is new strength in the conservative movement, a strength that comes from single issue organizations joining forces with broader conservative groups to defeat legislation."[5] Viguerie's headquarters near Falls Church, Va., contains 3,100 computerized mailing

lists from conservative and right-wing contributors. It is estimated that Viguerie sends out an average of five million pieces of mail a month.[6]

Concerned by growing strength from the New Right, a group of moderate republicans, organized by Michigan Governor William G. Millikan, met recently to discuss the possible take over of the Republican Party by ultra-conservatives. Congressman John B. Anderson is quoted as having said, that "extremist fringe elements who claim membership in our part seek to expel the rest of us from the GOP, using their own arbitrary, philosophical purgative."[7] Saul Friedman, an observer of the political scene and writer for the Knight-Ridder papers, claims "in legislative battles in Congress, in political fund-raising, in modilizing support on controversial issues throughout the country, in winning key off-year elections, and in sheer intellectual energy and talent the New Right has overwhelmed the traditional Republican establishment."[8] At a time when the Republican party is at a 40 year low in membership it would seem a conservative change in republican politics is about to take place.

It should not go unnoted that many of the organizers and background persons associated with the New Right were for a time in favor of creating a third party to the right of the republican party.[9] Many of the supporters were associated with the Reagan campaign, and it appears that Reagan is actively seeking to elect persons associated with his political platform.[10] Reagan's Citizens for the Republic,

is reported to have over one million dollars in campaign funds, from the last election and is said to be receiving funds to defeat liberal or moderate candidates at the rate of $100,000 per month.[11]

During a time of apathy at the polls, and low voter turnout during off year elections, it might be expected that the New Right will continue to be a political influence on the American horizon. If the New Right shows signs of exerting influence, it can only be observed that such influence will probably be long lasting and enduring. At a deeper level growing numbers of concerned citizens are expressing discontent in a series of grass-root issues that feed the ideology and hopes of the New Right. Within the milieu, are serious issues involving education. Three examples will suffice; Taxes, Religious fundamentalism, and the Equal Rights Amendment.

Taxes

During the last few years a growing number of conservatives, moderates and liberals have expressed alarm at the financial debt accumulated by state, and national government. Within the framework a campaign to drastically restrict government funding seems to be forming.

An example of the broad depth of support can be found in a number of organizations. Among them, The National Taxpayers Union (NTU) has been working to require that the federal budget be balanced; and to prohibit the government from taking more than 25% of income from taxable sources. Their proposal for a required federal balancing of the budget has been endorsed by

the legislatures of 12 states.[12] An example of the educational concerns inherent in discussion of taxes may be found in a recent speech by James L. Tobin of the NTU speaking before an Illinois crowd. Tobin claimed "It's immoral to force me to pay for educational facilities when I don't have any children to send to school. It's immoral to force the elderly and retired to pay for schools that are no use to them."[13] It is to be expected that educational expenses and accountability will become a prime concern for many Americans. Educational expenses clearly constitute a major arena of concern for state, local and national budgets.

The John Birch Society, quick to pick up areas of discontent, has recently established a priority for increasing their front group Tax Reform Immediately, TRIM. "We are confident," writes Welch, "that pressure will continue to grow if thousands of TRIM bulletins are distributed throughout each and every Congressional district."[14] The TRIM bulletin relating to the alleged records of target congressmen, is printed by the national headquarters of the Birch Society, sent to local chapters, and then circulated. As has been true of many Birch projects, the literature is often not identified as having come from the Birch headquarters. In September, 1977, Robert Welch directed members to distribute over 2,500,000 copies this fall.[15] Wes McCune, a national authority on right wing activities, has observed such distribution is a frequent occurance during off-year elections noting that the Birch Society may circumvent the federal election laws by

starting before the incumbent is a declared candidate for re-election.[16]

Another organization within the traditional fold of the far-right has had considerable success using the tax issue. The Liberty Lobby, a nationally based Washington organization with several publications, front groups and their own publishing firm, has devoted considerable attention to the anti-tax movement. The Spotlight, a major Liberty Lobby publication, has grown from 40,000 subscribers in 1975 to over 100,000 in 1977 and is actively advertising the aims of similar groups across the country.[17] Martin A. Larson, a staff member of Liberty Lobby, and author of a number of books encouraging persons to refrain from paying taxes, advertises to readers that his book, How to Defend Yourself Against the IRS contains advice which, if followed, will make IRS operations impossible.[18] Audie McBrearty, indicted by a federal grand jury for tax evasion, reveived the Lobby's Liberty Award, as head of the United States Taxpayers Union last year.[19]

The impact of the Liberty Lobby campaign is difficult to assess. It is clear however that the organization enjoys some support from other conservative congressmen and has gained support from their activities on the anti-tax front. The radio message of Liberty Lobby is heard on over 300 stations daily and it is possible their influence will continue to grow.[20]

Tax issues have been especially beneficial to the ultra-conservative and far-right complex. The growing concern by moderate and liberals alike about higher taxes suggests the inroads from the far-right will be enhanced by discontent about higher costs.

Religious Fundamentalism

The Gallup Poll dubbed 1976 the year of the Evangelical and revealed that one third of adult Americans, or about 50 million people, have had a "born again" religious conversion.[21] The political impact of this growing religious movement, while diverse, seems to be most politicized among fundamentalists associated with the far-right. Among the more significant indices of the diverse fundamentalist organizations is a view, that political involvement of Christians should be increased, and that legislators should be judged on their religiosity.

The attempt to elect born again conservative Christians to political office was endorsed by Bill Bright, Director of the Campus Crusade for Christ, and an early supporter of Ronald Reagon.[22] Supported by the Third Century Publishers, Bright, and others, including Billy Graham, have encouraged Chirstians to become political. Third Century Publications include a series of books by Russ Walton whose views of education are interesting ...busing, integration, federal aid, unions, godlessness in the public schools must be fought.[23] "The tide of atheism in education, media and government is running strongly against us" claims Bill Bright. To turn the tide, Bright suggests "...electing men and women of God to public office, from the local school board to the U.S. Congress and the White House."[24] Richard Viguerie has noted the increased religious concerns of many Americans. He is quoted as having said "The next real area of growth for the conservative ideology and (political) philosophy is

among evangelical people. I would not be surprised if in the next year you did not see a massive effort to involve them utilizing direct mail and other techniques."[25] God, it would seem, is viewed as something of an ultra-conservative. As Fundamentalist Carl McIntire once observed, "Is it not marvelous that when we all get to heaven there will not be any Modernists?"[26]

The Anti-ERA Campaign

With growing sophistication, large numbers of grass-root citizens have demonstrated effectiveness in writing letters, visiting congressmen at the state and national level, protesting passage of the Equal Rights Amendment. At the center of the anti-ERA movement is Phyllis Schlafly's organization, the Eagle Forum which is estimated to have some 50,000 core members.[27] Phyllis Schlafly, an early supporter of the Reagan campaign and speaker before a number of conservative and fundamentalist groups, including the John Birch Society, has united a considerable political force.

Within the last few months the stated goals of the Eagle Forum has instituted an provocative new educational dimension in the anti-ERA movement. Included in the statement of purposes is a referent to education which claims belief in the right of parents to insist that schools permit voluntary prayer, teach the precepts of holy scriptures, use textbooks that do not offend the religious and moral views of parents, permit children to attend schools of their neighborhood and use textbooks that honor the family having the woman's role as wife and mother.[28]

In December of 1976, the Phyllis Schlafly Report circulated the address of Jo-Ann Abrigg, president of the Committee for Positive Education, which claimed that "We parents are indeed paying taxes to school systems that hire teachers and teachers and purchase educational programs that fill our children's minds with garbage and utilize psychological techniques to condition our children to anti-christian judeo philosophy and religion."[29]

As National Defense Chairwoman of the Daughters of the American Revolution, Ms. Schlafly has introduced the matter of secular humanism and the Abrigg article for action by the DAR.[30] Although it is too soon to estimate the success of these issues within the DAR, it is evident that the public schools, and the organizational support of Phyllis Schlafly is not going to disappear. Education, long an easy target for the right wing, seems destined to enter another more difficult period of debate and educators would be wise to watch the warning signs.

Conclusion

If a new-right coalition continues to grow, it is likely American education can expect another round of pressure from the ultra-conservatives to restrict funding and curricula. It can only be observed that such pressure could hardly come at a worse moment for educators experiencing dwindling enrollments, less money, and uncertainty about the future. It is ironic that the very conditions that seem to impose restrictions in education occur at a point in time when new breakthroughs in curricula and educational structure hold

promise for better educational programs.

An argument can be made that we are experiencing a brief liaison among far-right and new right organizations. Past history suggests coalitions among true believers is tenuous, and, at present, there are few persons with sufficient political charisma to maintain the successes that have been made in the New Right. However, recent developments in terms of money, influence, and continued growth, suggest American education is about to experience a restorative and traditional coalition of politically active ultra-conservatives bent upon turning America back to the basics and restricting educational support at the local, state and national level.

At issue here is not the right of persons to express their views about the schools, society, or politics. Rather the point is that unless moderate American voters are informed of the needs and importance of American education during the next few years many of the advances and needs of public education may be in jeopardy.

As always, the direction of our nation's schools is a function of prevailing public opinion. As such, current developments on the new-right suggest American education may be on the brink of experiencing serious pressure. This time however, the concern will be longer lasting, and of greater political impact than perhaps at any other time in American history.

The democratic process is a function of responsible open and public debate, unless educators are able to enlist the support for education; one of our nations most vital resources, the public schools and ~~then~~ our youth, the next generation of America, will not be able to

cope with the increasing difficulty of a world grown suddenly complex. The ability to cope with change, diversity, and conflict, continues to be the key upon which a democratic society is based. As it looks now, educators will need to beomce increasingly involved in sending their message to the public about the necessity of continued support. Unless we are successful in realizing our responsibility to our students and the country, the problems before us will be difficult indeed. Whatever, the outcome, the evidence is clear that realignment is taking place in America; that many are seeking easy simplistic answers to restore some kind of order through a monistic view of ultra-conservative politics. Unless the educators are prepared to become involved in the debate, the future for our youth, the nation and the world will look bleak indeed. The next phase of American education is about to begin; and education is in trouble - perhaps more serious trouble than most of us recognize.

Footnotes

1. Alvin Toffler, Future Shock (Random House, Inc., 1970), p. 268.

2. Bill Sievert, "Collision Course: New Right vs Gay Rights" Pacific News Service, The Capital Times, Madison, WI. August 1, 1977.

3. See especially "Guess Who's Running for Congress?" The National Committee for an Effective Congress, 10 East 39th Street, NY. October, 1977.

4. Bill Sievert, "Collision Course: New Right vs Gay Rights" Pacific News Service, The Capital Times, Madison, WI. August 1, 1977.

5. Conservative Digest, September, 1977.

6. David Gelman, James Doyle, Michael J. Sniffen, Phyllis Malamud and Gerald C. Lubenow "Is America Turning Right?" Newsweek, November 7, 1977.

7. New York Times, September 19, 1977. Quoted in Group Research Report August, 1977. p. 25.

8. New York Times, September 19, 1977. Quoted in Group Research Report August, 1977. p. 25.

9. The move for a third party during the last presidential election appears to have been a priority for many within the Reagan Campaign. Although the research data is limited on this point, it appears many of the active directors of new right organizations have been supportive of the Reagan campaign.

10. "Guess Who's Running for Congress?" The National Committee for an Effective Congress, 10 East 39th Street, New York, NY, October, 1977.

11. "Guess Who's Running for Congress?" The National Committee for an Effective Congress, 10 East 39th Street, New York, NY, October, 1977.

12. "Taxpayers Union Pushing Law for Balanced Budget" Nashville Banner, May 18, 1976. Reprinted in the literature of the National Taxpayers Union.

13. "Chicago Area Taxpayer Revolt Picks Up Steam" The Milwaukee Journal, August 21, 1977. p.6.

14. The John Birch Society Bulletin, March, 1977, p. 13.

15. The John Birch Society Bulletin, September, 1977, p. 21.

16. Group Research Report, September 28, 1977.

17. "Big-City Papers Lose Readers as Credibility Plunges," Spotlight, March 21, 1977, p. 15.

18. Martin A. Larson, "Our World in Conflict," Spotlight, April 18, 1977, P. 17.

19. "Scare Stunts Aim for Tax Deadline," Spotlight, April 18, 1977, p. 11.

20. Spotlight, July 4, 1977, p. 20.

21. For an excellent discussion of the influence of religion and politics, see: Albert J. Menendez Religion at the Polls (The Westminster Press, 1977.)

22. Jim Wallis and Wes Michaelson, "The Plan to Save America," Sojourners Magazine. April, 1976. Reprinted in The Humanist, September/October 1976. p. 13-14.

23. See especially: Rus Walton Study Plan and Leader's Guide: One Nation Under God (Washington, D.C.: Third Century Publishers, 1975). Also: In The Spirit of 76: The Citizen's Guide to Politics (Washington, D.C.: Third Century Publishers, 1975).

24. Albert J. Menendez Religion at the Polls (The Westminster Press, 1977). p. 202.

25. Jim Wallis and Wes Michaelson, "The Plan to Save America," Sojourners Magazine, April, 1976,. Reprinted in The Humanist, September/ October 1976, p. 13-14.

26. Carl McIntire "The Meeting in the Skies" p.2. Quoted in Erling Jorstad's The Politics of Doomsday: Fundamentalists of the Far Right (Abingdon Press, 1970) p. 134.

27. Richard Boeth, Michael J. Sniffen, James Doyle, Elaine Sciolino "Is America Turning Right?" Newsweek, November 7, 1977. p. 41.

28. Membership leaflet: Eagle Forum: The Alternative to Women's Lib., Box 618, Alton, Illinois.

29. Jo-Ann Abrigg, "In the Name of Education" The Phyllis Schlafly Report", December, 1976.

30. Jo-Ann Abrigg "In the Name of Education" Daughters of the American Revolution Magazine, August/September, 1977. pp. 696-700.